

BET Hosts Monthlong Tribute to Melvin Van Peebles

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BET Hosts Monthlong Tribute to Melvin Van Peebles

Melvin Van Peebles' "Classified X" will have its U.S. premiere on BET Movies/STARZ!3 on Friday, Nov. 13 at 10 p.m. (ET/PT). The startling, award-winning documentary will serve as the cornerstone of a monthlong

"Messages from Melvin" salute.

"Melvin Van Peebles has been revered as the Godfather of contemporary African American cinema," said Nina Henderson, vice president of BET Movies. "We are proud to showcase Melvin's critically acclaimed new documentary "Classified X," as well as films from his remarkable career to the next generation."

"BET Movies is a perfect home for "Classified X," said Melvin Van Peebles. "I'm very pleased that, at last, there is a channel that not only celebrates black films but also provides an audience for new, up-and-coming black filmmakers."

The Van Peebles films airing during the salute include "Identity Crisis," "Don't Play Us Cheap, Story of a Three Day Pass," "Watermelon Man" and the best-known, highly controversial "Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." "Classified X," which received its debut at this year's Sundance Film Festival, was screened at the closing night of the New York Human Rights Festival in June and also won best documentary at the Urbanworld Film Festival in New York City. Written and performed by Van Peebles, and co-produced with Films d'ici/ARTE/YEAH Inc., the provocative documentary explores the movie images that have helped sustain racism throughout the decades and examines the treatment of black characters throughout the history of America cinema. Van Peebles uses examples from classic films beginning with footage by Thomas Edison in 1903 to the present, tracing how Hollywood has aided and abetted the public perception of the African American down through the years. And using scenes from American films as chilling references, he explains with wit and anger why movie images have helped to perpetuate this injustice.

Melvin Van Peebles is a screenwriter, director, actor, musician, editor and novelist. While he has been called the "Godfather of modern black cinema," he has also distinguished himself in other mediums. After serving a stint in the U.S. Air Force, he lived in Mexico where he worked as a painter in the mid-1950s.

Van Peebles made his first short films—"A King," "Three Pickup Men For Herrick" and "Sunlight" in 1958—while working in a San Francisco post office. He moved to Holland to study astronomy at the University of Amsterdam and then went to live in Paris, where he earned his living as a street singer. While in Paris, he taught himself French and worked as a journalist for a French newspaper and began writing French language novels.

Van Peebles made his feature film debut by adapting his novel, "The Story of a Three Day Pass" (1967), into a feature film. The film told the story of a romance between an American Negro soldier and a young French woman. His film was selected as the French entry in the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival, and Van Peebles arrived in San Francisco as one

of the official French Delegates. The film was the Critics' Choice and brought Van Peebles his first international recognition.

Van Peebles went on to sign with Columbia Pictures , where he directed the comedy "Watermelon Man" (1970), about a white bigot (played by Godfrey Cambridge in whiteface) who one day wakes up black. With this film, Van Peebles became the first black director to direct a film in Hollywood.

Van Peebles independently produced, directed, wrote, scored, and starred in his best-known film, the highly controversial "Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" (1971). The film cost less than \$500,000 to make (including \$50,000 borrowed from Bill Cosby) and grossed over \$10 million. "Dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man," "Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" was the first film of its kind, expressing a distinctly black experience and point of view in an explosion of anger and humor, and thus ushering in the genre of "blaxploitation." Van Peebles continues to be a major influence on young black filmmakers, who consider him to be a folk hero.

After working in three vastly different styles of filmmaking (European art, American studio, and independent), Van Peebles moved on to other interests. He also created the Tony Awardnominated musicals "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death" and "Don't Play Us Cheap," which began the growing black presence on Broadway. Van Peebles segued to television, writing the screenplay and composing the title song for a TV movie pilot entitled "Just An Old Sweet Song" (CBS , 1976). Cicely Tyson and Robert Hooks starred in the drama about a Detroit family that is strongly affected by a two-week vacation down South.

He then wrote the sequel television special entitled "Down Home" (CBS , 1978). In between, Van Peebles co-wrote the screenplay for "Greased Lightning" (1977), a low-budget film starring Richard Pryor as Wendell Scott, the first black race car driver.

Van Peebles' experience in the arts taught him that often the most challenging aspect of creation was financing a project. He therefore decided to try his hand at commodities trading where he enjoyed success in the 1980s. He even wrote a financial self-help guide called Bold Money: A New Way to Play the Options-Market (1986).

Van Peebles' son, Mario, worked as a model and first gained celebrity as an actor in films and television. He starred as "Sonny Spoon" (NBC, 1988), a detective series from producer Steven J. Cannell. The show afforded the elder Van Peebles his first role as a recurring character on a television series as he played Spoon's bartender father Mel. Van Peebles again collaborated with his son (who wrote, co-produced, and starred) in "Identity Crisis" (1990), his first feature directing effort in 17 years. Van Peebles also played a supporting role in the mostly black Western "Posse" (1993),

directed by his son.

Van Peebles returned to the spotlight with "Panther" (1995), a fictionalized chronicle of the rise of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, directed by Mario and co-produced and scripted by **Melvin** from his novel.

Additional book credits include A Bear for the FBI (1969), The True American and Just An Old Sweet Song (1976).

In all of his works, **Van Peebles** raises a uniquely black voice, imbued with an essential humanism that speaks to any audience.

Photo (**Melvin Van Peebles**)

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